

# Using focal plants

Focal plants work on several levels: they can entice you into a garden, distract you from ugly views beyond the boundary, or provide an eye-catching feature within a border. Most focal plants are evergreen or have strong shapes or colours, and offer a long

season of interest, but don't dismiss those that perform for only a few weeks each year. Allow them their brief, glorious time in the limelight, and plan the rest of the garden around the show. Remember that focal and feature plants are the same thing.

## VISUAL TRICKERY

In much the same way as you would use a statue or an attractive container, you can site focal plants to lead the viewer's eye to a particular area of the garden. Positioned strategically, they can also distract attention from unsightly objects or views. Their presence not only makes someone shift their gaze, but can entice them to take a stroll around the garden too. When focal plants are repeated throughout a long border they act like visual stepping stones, helping to carry the eye along its length. They also hold the planting together, giving it an essential cohesion. Finally, using a clever trick of perspective, when planted in the foreground, focal plants make the garden behind seem like a separate area waiting to be explored.



### < HANDLE CAREFULLY

Take care that a plant does not overwhelm the garden by grabbing all the attention and becoming an unplanned focal plant.

### ✓ SCENE STEALER

Pampas grasses have considerable stature, even when they are not in flower. Their late summer display makes them the natural focus of attention.



## USING COLOUR

Very few plants can offer season-long colour, but you can still achieve some great effects with even just a short burst of activity from foliage or flowers. The following are all good candidates for focal plants: the autumn foliage of Japanese acers, azaleas, *Fothergilla*, and larch; the flowers of *Hamamelis*, *Laburnum*, and *Viburnum plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Mariesii'; and the winter stems of many of the birches, dogwoods, and willows.

Plants that provide dramatic colour, however, need careful handling. Remember that bright reds or yellows planted at the furthest corners of the garden have a foreshortening effect. On the other hand, using paler colours at the end of the garden visually lengthens your plot (see p.46).

### > COLOUR CARE

Acers are real scene stealers when their foliage fires up in autumn. Position them carefully among more subdued colours so that they can really shine out.

### >> SECOND INNINGS

Hydrangea flowers are great value: colourful when fresh in summer, ethereally beautiful when faded in autumn, and stunning in winter with a dusting of frost.



### ✓ COME CLOSER

The vibrant pink, pea-like flowers of *Cercis siliquastrum* appear before the leaves in early spring. The tree's form provides a focus at other times of the year.



### ^ WORTH THE WAIT

A single plant's display (here a *Yucca*) can be the *raison d'être* and seasonal climax of a whole section of a garden.

## STRIKING SHAPES

Many plants have naturally architectural or sculptural shapes: *Acer palmatum* var. *dissectum*, *Cornus alternifolia*, *Phormium*, and *Yucca* all make great focal plants. Many more, however, can be enticed over time with pruning and training to take on striking forms. This can be through traditional topiary, using slow-growing evergreens such as box, yew, *Ilex crenata*, or *Ligustrum delavayanum*. (Avoid fast-growing plants such as *Lonicera nitida*, which needs clipping several times over the summer to stop it losing its shape.) In addition, the adventurous gardener may like to experiment with other creative pruning techniques. By trimming off the lower branches of shrubs and trees you can make standards that produce lollipop shapes, or you can manipulate the branches to form tiers or cascading stems. *Carpinus betulus*, *Cotoneaster frigidus*, *Thuja plicata*, and *Viburnum plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Mariesii' are just four that respond well to this type of pruning. When trained, the skeletal winter outlines of deciduous plants can be as interesting as their leafy summer profiles.



### ^ IN THE LIMELIGHT

Large scale centrepieces, these birch trees are made all the more arresting with dramatic winter sunlight.

### < HAVE FUN WITH TOPIARY

Extravagance and humour are two ingredients that turn a feature into a great focal point. Here, yew is being trained through a giant topiary frame.